

## The Importance of Paralegal Certification

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The legal profession is inundated with highly skilled, educated and irreplaceable talent, often found working expeditiously in the background. While these individuals may not have attended law school, they are active members of the legal team who yearn to share their potential and success with attorneys who are eager to treat them as equals. These individuals are best known in the legal profession as paralegals.

Even though paralegals have been working in the legal field for many years, the complexity of a paralegal's role within a firm is often misunderstood. While many of us are still required to perform general clerical tasks, our capacity to assist counsel in highly detailed and multifaceted legal tasks is ultimately boundless. Paralegals such as myself are up to the challenge and are determined to continue learning and growing within the profession, so we may offer a higher level of consistency and skill within our work. While one way to achieve this higher level of skill is through formal legal education, there aren't many options for those of us who have already met or exceeded formal education goals, such as degrees. Outside of formal education, national and state paralegal certification is yet another way for a paralegal to show their dedication to the profession.

The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) offers a formal certification program to all paralegals across the United States. As the testing process is rigorous, paralegals who have achieved this level of certification are surely dedicated and have worked extremely hard to prove their value within the legal field. Paralegals who are certified through NALA have demonstrated their legal skill by taking and passing two equally complicated tests: the knowledge test and the skills test. The knowledge test requires memorization of federal laws, regulations and terms in several key legal areas, while the skills test assesses a paralegal's ability to argue a legal issue consistently and effectively without advanced preparation. While the Certified Paralegal program is only one certification in a sea of others, it is largely the most popular. Paralegals searching for additional certifications also have the option of becoming a Registered Paralegal through The National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA), a Professional Paralegal through The National Association of Legal Support Professionals (NALS)—and the list goes on.

Additionally, there is also the option of state paralegal certification. Currently, 278 Kentucky paralegals have taken the time, made the effort and passed the test to become a Certified Kentucky Paralegal. Obtaining these certifications is only the first step. To keep these certifications, paralegals must meet yearly continuing legal education requirements, like that of attorneys.

While many paralegals take the initiative to seek out those additional advancement opportunities, others may benefit from the support of their attorney to begin the cer-

tification journey. Attorneys working with non-certified paralegals are well-positioned to encourage certification within the paralegal profession. By promoting paralegal certification, attorneys will benefit from this increased knowledge which will not only lighten their existing workload, but potentially increase the hourly rate of the paralegal's billables, which as we all know is extremely important.

Paralegals are a crucial part of the legal team, and certification absolutely enhances that cruciality. Gone are the days when the terms "paralegal" and "legal assistant" were synonymous. Paralegals are more than capable of performing detailed legal research, drafting complex legal documents, conducting meetings with clients, preparing detailed legal summaries, organizing each aspect of trial preparation and everything in between. In some instances, paralegals may even represent individuals in administrative hearings. The tasks that an attorney may assign to a paralegal are endless. Most paralegals seek to be challenged in ways that require constant learning. So, attorneys, challenge your paralegal. Trust them to rise to the challenge, whether it be obtaining certification, or trying their hand at an assignment previously done by someone above their level.

In my twenty-five years of working as a paralegal, I am more confident in my ability when I know that my attorney trusts me enough to challenge me even more than I challenge myself. After obtaining my national paralegal certification, I can attest that the certification program truly increased my knowledge of the legal field tenfold. It certainly made me appreciate my job more, become more dedicated and willing to learn everything I can to support my team of attorneys. If you are a paralegal reading this, obtaining your national certification is worth it. If you are an attorney reading this, encourage your paralegal to obtain their certification because it will be worth it for both of you.

If you are one of the lucky ones to have a certified paralegal that you trust to be by your side, do everything you can to encourage and support them. Remind them how important they are to your team. Lastly, if your paralegal is not certified, encourage it. Even if you consider them to be amazing, certification will only make them better, thus making your life a little easier.

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